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Livesey

Major Article

Free Trade and Empire in the Anglo-Irish Commercial Propositions of 1785

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I would like to acknowledge the comment and insight on earlier versions of this article by the members of the History Department at Peking University and the participants at the “1763 and All That: Temptations of Empire in the British World in the Decade after the Seven Years War” conference held at the Institute for Historical Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Free Trade and Empire in the Anglo-Irish Commercial Propositions of 1785

Free trade was a central demand of Irish patriot writers and economic theorists from the accession of William and Mary onward, yet when free trade was offered to Ireland in 1785 it was rejected.¹ The politics of this reform measure were not well handled. William Pitt was in the early, vulnerable months of his premiership and had alienated even some of his political friends with the India Act. Opposition to Pitt in both British and Irish Parliaments created a strange alliance of disappointed Whigs, English monopolists and Irish Patriots to defeat free trade for Ireland.² The factional dynamics of parliamentary politics do not tell the full story however. In the eighteenth century free trade was central to British ideas of commercial development, Enlightenment ideals of peaceful progress, and crucial to specific debates about Ireland's role in the world.³ No less an authority than Montesquieu had asserted that without free trade Ireland's "prosperity would be only precarious and only a deposit for a master."⁴ The capacity to trade freely was understood to be constitutive of national independence and so the definition of exactly what it was to conduct a "free trade" was one of the central debates of Enlightenment political economy.⁵ Free trade became a feature of popular politics in Ireland by the 1770s and inspired shopping boycotts and non-importation agreements.⁶

Free trade also became conjoined with anti-slavery sentiment and contributed, through Dublin Quaker Mary Birkett's The African slave trade: addressed to members of her own sect, to creating the powerful representation of freedom-loving Ireland in contrast with exploitative England.⁷ Political opportunism goes a long way to explaining resistance to Pitt's reform in England, but that explanation is less compelling for Ireland, and the measure finally died in the Irish Parliament.

John Hely-Hutchinson, provost of Trinity College, MP for Cork, and supporter of free trade for Ireland, was flabbergasted by this decision by the Parliament: "When I reflect how long Scotland had endeavoured to obtain from England the protection of her navigation laws and the benefits of her colony trade; that, what is now offered to be permanently granted to Ireland without any infringement of her rights of legislation could not be purchased by Scotland without the surrender of her sovereignty... I view with amazement the wonderful revolutions of human sentiments."⁸ William Pitt had been entirely confident the measure would pass, "I am confirmed by the opinions of Mr Foster and Mr Beresford as well as Mr Orde, that the compleat liberty and equality in matters of trade which will by this plan be given to Ireland, ought to give the fullest satisfaction on that subject".⁹ Richard Wellesley, writing to Irish patriot leader Henry Grattan, failed to understand the cause of opposition: "the more so as I cannot, after a very attentive consideration, discover how they affect the rights of Ireland as established in 1782."¹⁰ As late as March 1785, when the plan had passed through the Irish Parliament, Pitt expressed himself, "persuaded, if I can trust my feelings on this subject, that every able and disinterested friend to the dignity and interests of Ireland, such as man as for instance Mr Grattan, will upon reflection see every object he can have at heart better consulted on this

plan, than according to the Irish Resolutions themselves.”¹¹ By granting a free trade, Pitt had assumed that the campaign for sugar tariffs mounted by Irish manufacturers, the Irish Resolutions, would be undermined, since their interests would be so much better served by open access to British markets.¹² How had these astute observers of Irish politics so miscalculated the effects of the proposals?

The wider imperial context helps us to understand how this early effort to create a “free trade empire” failed.¹³ The measure proposed in 1785 sought to stabilise the political relationship between Britain and Ireland within a larger vision of a commercial empire. As Pitt told Rutland, “an arrangement is defensible only on the idea of relinquishing local prejudices and partial advantages, in order to consult uniformly and without distinction, the general benefit of the Empire.”¹⁴ The ambition of the propositions helps to explain why they generated some odd political alliances. Edmund Burke and William Eden, for instance, both opposed this measure even though they were in principle supporters of the liberalization of trade with Ireland and would later support freeing trade with France.¹⁵ Eden had spoken in favor of “a general act of settlement, which he thought a necessary measure for the peace of both countries” as recently as 1783.¹⁶ These incongruities emerged because the Irish debate opened up differences between varying ideas of free trade and forced participants in the debate to clarify exactly what their own positions were. When we locate this debate in a moment of imperial reform just what was at stake becomes much clearer.¹⁷

Three contrasting ideas of free trade became apparent in the debates around the propositions of 1785: imperial or neo-Mercantilist free trade, Smithean free trade, and national or neo-Machiavellian free trade.¹⁸ As there was no consensus on the meaning of

free trade, the idea could not in itself provide an authoritative or neutral instrument of imperial integration. The debates on the Irish Propositions of 1785 represented a vital moment in the process through which the British Empire confronted the problem of redefining itself in the aftermath of the American War. They should be understood in the context of Shelburne's advocacy of liberal empire and reconciliation with America, the Hastings trial, the India Acts, the Anglo-French negotiations and the other features of the "imperial meridian."¹⁹ Much more was at stake in 1785 than the mutual incomprehension, or even suspicion, of British and Irish political elites. Fundamental problems of the reconstitution of the British Empire in the aftermath of the American defeat were being worked through. Through these debates, politicians, pamphleteers and the public in both Britain and Ireland discovered that Imperial reform faced genuine institutional and intellectual difficulties. Free trade, which was the guiding ideal of liberal, commercial empire, proved difficult to define, let alone institute.

In recent years we have come to understand free trade less as an economic mechanism and more as a norm embedded in particular political, cultural, and social visions and institutions.²⁰ If we approach free trade in an ahistorical manner or as an element in a timeless model of economic liberalism we run the risk of completely misunderstanding what was at stake in arguments about trade in the eighteenth century.²¹ Sophus Reinert argues that John Cary's much-translated Essay on the Trade of England viewed the conduct of a free trade as an act of imperial assertion. A free trade, for Cary, was a trade unencumbered by monopolies and privileges, but always conducted within the strategic context of expansive imperial ambition.²² Adam Smith later argued in a contrary sense that free trade was an element in a project of improvement that would end

the condition of scarcity that drove the warfare of imperial ambition. Even more ambitiously Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce de Européens dans les deux Indes*, first published in 1770, saw free trade as a policy with a morally improving outcome. Free trade would eliminate the more nefarious effects of global commerce, especially slavery, by exposing the inefficient productions of slaveholders to the competition of free men.²³ Debates on free trade, its possibilities and limits, were integral to debates on the nature of the empire.²⁴

Theory and practice did not perfectly coincide. Free trade was a value not a principle, and a very flexible one, that, as the economic historians Findlay and O'Rourke argue, of necessity had to be exercised within the constraints imposed by a period of inter-state competition without settled principles of international law or a hegemon willing to impose international trade rules.²⁵ Maintaining a free trade sometimes seemed to demand undermining free trade. British merchants connived at the downfall of the Marqués de Esquilache in 1766 after, by introducing imperial free trade to the Spanish Caribbean, he threatened the capacity of British merchants to continue their trade through Spanish proxies.²⁶ When we historicize free trade in this fashion, we can see that its political content changed radically after 1763 for, but not necessarily in, Ireland. Irish arguments for free trade in the early part of the eighteenth century had seen it as an instrument for national self-assertion, while by 1785, free trade had become an instrument of imperial integration. The embrace of free trade early in the century in Ireland and its rejection later were driven by similar imperatives; what changed was the context of empire.



Free trade was ideologically central but in practice peripheral to Irish experience in the late seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century. Irish trade was constrained by a series of acts of the English Parliament. The first Navigation Act of 1651, which had attempted to organise colonial trade, had included Irish merchants within its provisions as subjects of the English crown but all subsequent acts expressly excluded and restricted Irish trade from and to the English colonies. The 1663 Staple Act demanded that all European commodities supplied to the colonies be exported through England. It excluded horses, servants, victuals, and, later linen, from its provisions. This stipulation generated some unforeseen benefits as the extent of naval warfare in the eighteenth century and the need to supply the West Indies by convoy effectively gave the port of Cork a monopoly on the West Indian provision trade and considerable advantages in naval provisioning.²⁷ The linen trade would similarly provide the basis for the transformation of Ulster.²⁸ These restrictions were only the beginning of a series of acts that did not comprise a system for the management of Irish trade but rather an ad hoc assemblage of prohibitions inspired by particular interests in England.²⁹ The 1671 Navigation Act prohibited import of scheduled plantation products, including tobacco and cotton, directly to Ireland, and so restricted the development of a reciprocal trade between the islands and Ireland. The 1696 Board of Trade, which was to coordinate and control the economic relationships between the realms under the English crown, was dominated by neo-Machiavellians such as John Cary and further restricted Irish agency.³⁰ The first Cattle Act of 1667, which excluded Irish meat from the English market, and the Woollen Act of 1699 prohibiting export of Irish woollens anywhere and restricting sale of yarn and wool to England, were the most important elements of this set of acts. The

British Parliament continued to enact new constraints on Irish trade as late as 1733 when the Molasses Act prohibited the import of sugar and all its derived products, such as spirits and molasses, from the Americas. The economic effects of these regulations are much debated. On the one hand, the Cattle and Wool Acts did redirect Irish agriculture toward tillage and away from its natural comparative advantage in pasturage and the profits to be made supplying high value protein to expanding English towns.³¹ On the other, the same market offered profits for Irish grain and for the expanding beer trade. Moreover, the opportunities for smuggling were rife and the mutually reinforcing effects of low Irish tariffs and dense networks of Catholic and Protestant merchant houses acting throughout Southern Europe made Ireland an entrepôt in a variety of high value trades. As late as 1789, half of all trade with the British Isles from Bordeaux was conducted through Ireland and at various points in the eighteenth century that proportion had been as high as three-quarters of Bordeaux's insular trade.³² Exclusion from the colonial trade and restrictions in particular sectors did not completely hamstring Irish efforts to participate in the burgeoning Atlantic markets.

While the instruments that restricted Irish trade did not form a coherent system for the management of Ireland, they did reflect a consistent position that was publicly articulated by a series of authors. John Cary, a prominent pamphleteer in the 1690s, justified restriction of Irish trade as a reasonable demand for accommodation to its place in an imperial system: "that Ireland is now destructive to the interest of England I think it will admit of little dispute; for as long as that people enjoy so free and open a trade to foreign parts, and thereby are encouraged to advance in their woollen manufactures, they must consequently lessen ours."³³ Even though Cary was a critic of monopolies and

argued for the freedom of English subjects to trade freely, he held a fairly unsystematic and crude model of an imperial economy in which the ideal was a commercial England dominating a set of agrarian dependencies. He complained that the New England colonies had failed to occupy as much space as they might have had they given themselves over to their agricultural calling because they had been allowed to indulge in trade, “for trade being of itself less laborious, and the poor maintained thereby living more easie than such as are employed in the field, doth invite them rather to settle in that way than the other.”³⁴

John Locke thought this manner of conceiving of England’s interests absurd. As he explained to his Irish friend William Molyneux, “I think it a shame, that whilst Ireland is so capable to produce flax and hemp, and able to nourish the poor at so cheap a rate, and consequently to have their labour upon such easy terms, that so much money should go yearly out of the king’s dominions, to enrich foreigners....”³⁵ One of the reasons that Locke’s aspiration to allow Ireland as much liberty in her trade as possible was frustrated was the fact that even allies of his on the Board of Trade, such as John Polloxfen, accepted the premises under which Irish trade was controlled: “unless some way can be found out to insure their entire dependence upon England, grounded as well on religion as laws, that England may be sure to reap a lasting advantage there by the labours of the people there, and they can be brought to be more industrious, perpetual objections will arise against endeavours to increase riches in that kingdom....”³⁶ In the absence of a political coalition to generate support for Irish free trade, Josiah Child’s system of support for the Navigation Acts and control of the Woollen Trade as the basis for English prosperity organized English, and later British, policy.³⁷ English economist Charles Davanent, a Tory economic pamphleteer, restated John Cary’s view that Irish trade had to

be understood in the context of the empire, “that Ireland should judge of what is best for itself, is just and fair, but in determinations that are to reach the whole, as namely, what is most expedient for England and Ireland both, there, without all doubt, the supream [sic] judgment ought to rest in the King; Lords and Commons of England...”.³⁸ British imperial ideals turned on creating a free trade, which in practice meant access to Spanish markets in South America, but political imperatives severely restricted the capacity of Irish merchants freely to trade.

Even though Ireland was denied a free trade the idea remained a central element in Irish ideas about the commercial elements of British liberty. Irish thinkers in the 1720s and 30s generated a program and theory of domestic improvement that rescued the notion of economic liberty at the heart of free trade.³⁹ Even when imperfectly applied, the idea of free trade remained part of how the emerging British Empire was imagined to “consist of flourishing and commercially viable colonies, populated with free British subjects that served as bulwarks of trade, prosperity, naval strength and political virtue for the parent state,” as Kathleen Wilson puts it.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the Seven Years War, the frame for the debate on free trade was transformed in Britain. Arguments for the control of Irish trade moved from the dangers of Irish competition in particular sectors to the need to integrate Irish resources into an imperial polity. British power depended on trade, and protecting that trade required a strong state, but how was commercial liberty to reconcile “the strong presiding power, that is useful towards the conservation of a vast, disconnected, infinitely diversified empire with that liberty and safety of the provinces which they must enjoy?”⁴¹ As Peter Marshall explains, after 1763 the problem was intensified because there was a perception that the “empire of the seas,” based on trade,

had now been overlaid by an “empire of conquest.”⁴² Contingent factors reinforced the changing nature of the British realms. In the middle 1760s, trade to America, Europe, Ireland, and India actually declined from wartime levels.⁴³ This was dangerous since so much of the 600% increase in debt from the war was serviced by excise taxes. In response, manufacturers in Britain demanded more intensive control of the empire’s resources. William Mildmay, born in Surat in 1705, insisted that in regard to the Americas “our principle must be to encourage only the cultivation of materials, while we assume to ourselves what may be wanting for their improvement and manufacture.”⁴⁴ Imperial interests might demand regulation of the Atlantic trade in the form of registered companies on the model of the East India Company.⁴⁵ The structure of English trade, in particular the exchange of colonial goods for raw materials and military supplies such as masts, hemp, and tar from Northern Europe, also had to be sustained if England was to survive military competition with France.⁴⁶ The pressures and stress of victory were driving the British polity toward a more robust and thorough imposition of control from the center. The obvious threat was that such an intensified imperial project could provoke a provincial and colonial reaction



The classic statement of the Irish “Patriot” view of free trade, William Molyneux’s 1698 Case of Ireland, insisted on the incapacity of the English Parliament to make laws governing Irish trade.⁴⁷ In Molyneux’s view, restricting Irish trade undermined Irish freedoms and also threatened to unravel the texture of liberty in all the British dominions: “if being the King of England’s subjects be a reason why we ought to submit to laws (in relation to our trade abroad, in places where the Parliament of England has no jurisdiction) which have not received our assent; the people of England will

consider whether they also are not the king's subjects, and may therefore (by this way of reasoning) be bound by laws which the King may assign them without their assent, in relation to actions abroad, or foreign trade."⁴⁸ He argued that free trade for Ireland was not just a measure in Ireland's interest; it was a feature of English liberty. Free trade, in this formulation, meant the capacity of communities of people enjoying British liberty to organize their own affairs.

Molyneux's arguments in favor of free trade were consistently cited throughout the eighteenth century, and free trade with the colonies and plantations became one of the principal demands of the Volunteer movement, an armed militia that organised in response to the American revolution, in the late 1770s. "Free trade," a pseudonymous author wrote, offered "blessings which were not reached even by the hopes of our ancestors."⁴⁹ Free trade properly understood would not be an innovation, or a concession granted from Britain to Ireland but a constitutive element of British liberty, as Henry Grattan asserted when he encouraged the Lord Lieutenant "to open a free trade and let your Irish subjects enjoy their natural birthright."⁵⁰ Edmond Sexten Pery, member of the Irish parliament for Limerick City, speaker of the house, and a veteran of reform politics since the 1750s, responded to the request of the Lord Lieutenant, John Hobart, second earl of Buckinghamshire, for advice about how to respond to Irish distress caused by the American War.⁵¹ Sexten Pery acknowledged that no one factor explained Irish poverty, nor would any one measure relieve it, but even then "the general cause of distress is undoubtedly the restraint upon the trade, and consequently upon the industry of the kingdom. If the extent and operation of the laws, which limit the trade of Ireland are considered, it will appear that her complaints upon that head are not without

foundation.”⁵² The grant of limited free trade in 1779, allowing direct imports from the West Indies, was seen as part of a process that in time would allow Ireland to overcome its poverty by fully participating in a British trading world and so contribute to the stability of the British Empire. As Hely-Hutchinson remarked, “such a liberal system would increase the wealth of this kingdom by means that would strengthen the hands of government, and promote the happiness of the people. Ireland would be then able to contribute largely to the support of the British Empire, not only from the increase of her wealth, but from the more equal distribution of it into a greater number of hands among the various orders of the community.”⁵³ Free trade remained a central feature of the vision of Ireland’s place in a reformed, cosmopolitan British Empire.

The Irish critique of the effects of the Navigation Acts, Woollen Acts, and Declaratory Act had been echoed, and subtly transformed, in mid-century England in the writing of Josiah Tucker. He argued that prohibition of Irish trade had distorted British politics and created special interests in England, particularly in the West Country. The prohibition of Irish trade made as little sense to Tucker as prohibition of the trade of Middlesex, writing, “[i]f England itself was divided into two kingdoms, one comprehending all the South, the other all the North side of the Thames, and there were hostile prohibitions against importing certain sorts of goods from London to Southwark; and vice versa, and high duties upon all the rest: many individuals on both sides, would find their own private interest in upholding the division.”⁵⁴ Tucker took the freedom to truck and barter as natural, and saw prohibition as evidence of corruption. Regulation of trade was inefficient and unenforceable and in consequence prohibitions on Irish trade were absurd. Smuggling was so rife that even tariff reform could not eliminate it. John

Beresford casually commented in 1779 that even if duties on sugars from English colonies were equalized, the Irish very likely would take to smuggling Brazilian and French sugars, “more fit for that business than the Muscavado, as being somewhat refined in the plantations.”⁵⁵ Tucker argued the goal of trade policy should not be to maximise returns to the excise, but to stimulate economic growth. Were the Woollen Acts to be rescinded, “the wool which is now smuggled from Ireland into France, and manufactured there, and from thence sent to oppose our own commodities at foreign markets, would be manufactured in Ireland, the French would lose the benefit of it, the Irish would get it:—the rents of the estates in Ireland would rise, and then the money would soon find its way into England.”⁵⁶ Tucker supported free trade for Ireland not because he embraced Irish arguments for political autonomy, but because he was in favor of free trade as a principle of empire. Tucker understood the empire as a group of nations and territories with a common interest, rather than a set of possessions, and so he saw little advantage to Ireland in maintaining a separate legislature: “Edinburgh,... has thriven and flourished more since the Union than it did before... And were the Court and Parliament of Ireland to leave Dublin by virtue of an union with Great Britain, the same good consequences would certainly follow.”⁵⁷ What in Molyneux had been constitutive of British liberty became for Tucker constitutive of British empire. Obviously they understood both liberty and empire in very different ways.

Tucker clarified the new thinking on the relationship between free trade and imperial politics. Tucker’s sophisticated understanding of commerce and power allowed him to reach different conclusions about similar questions when posed in differing contexts. He embraced American independence because it would not undermine the real

basis of British power in the Americas, its domination of trade, writing that “as to the threats and menaces of the Americans; that they would have no more commercial intercourse with us I was always of the opinion that they were vain and idle words.”⁵⁸ Support for American independence did not make him a friend to Irish efforts at legislative independence, “the bulk of the Irish nation shall discover, that all their fine schemes have ended in disappointment, and that they have been put on a wrong scent to hunt after riches, extended commerce and enlarged navigations.”⁵⁹ Tucker argued that free trade for Ireland demanded that “the Irish might be incorporated the English Parliament.”⁶⁰ What had changed since Molyneux was that the cost of union had escalated; by the mid-eighteenth century, participating in the financial burden of empire, “bearing an equal share of taxes, and so easing England,” was understood to be a consequence of sharing in trade.⁶¹ Thomas Prior had developed a critique of absentee Irish landlords as a drain on Irish capital and resources.⁶² His ideas were inverted by Tucker to create an argument in favor of commercial union addressed to Englishmen worried about Irish competition, “the inducements of being near the Parliament, the Court, the public funds would bring many more Irish families to reside, and spend their fortunes here, than now do. In short, whatever wealth Ireland would draw from other countries by its produce, manufactures and happy situation; all that would continually centre in England.”⁶³ Tucker, Hume, Smith, and a plethora of less well-known thinkers began to converge on a discussion on how rich and poor nations within a free trade area would generate and distribute wealth and prosperity.⁶⁴ Smith eventually embraced free trade as a mechanism that would arrest the temptation on the part of merchants in rich nations to charge monopoly rents and so undermine commercial superiority by robbing

the rich nation of its advantages of productivity. Tucker, and the responses to him, opened up a new way of understanding the relationship between commerce, empire and free trade.

This reworking of free trade was not restricted to the debates of political economists. Newspaper commentary began to contrast an irrational Irish attachment to independent political institutions with the real benefits of an integrated trade. The Morning Post condemned Irish opinion: “as a proof of the great utility of a free trade to the kingdom of Ireland, a correspondent asserts, that a late distinguished Commoner recently called up to the House of Peers of that nation, has cleared no less, within a few years, that 40,000l but such is the bigotry of the people, that for sake of the ideal immunity of a separate parliament, they forego every real advantageous consideration.”⁶⁵ Cecil Wray, the independent MP and intermittent supporter of Wilkes, when opposing the proposal that Irish trade be released from impediment introduced to the British House of Commons in 1778, took up the same line as the Morning Post. Wray thought that free trade was admirable in principle, but impossible at the moment, since it would cost many English jobs and could only be introduced if it were balanced by a new distribution of the costs of empire, “he had no objections to admit of Ireland’s participating equally with us of the benefits of a free trade, provided she bore an equal share of our national burdens.”⁶⁶ There were even rumors in 1779 that in return for free trade, Ireland would agree to political union, application of all British taxes and tariffs, and a land tax of £150,000 per annum.⁶⁷

The contrast with the “Patriot” Irish understanding of what was at stake in the demand for free trade was stark. In late eighteenth-century Irish opinion, free trade was

still understood as one aspect of an assumed understanding of British liberty. Sir Edward Newenham, MP for Dublin County, articulated a particularly clear and radical version of that vision.⁶⁸ In his speech to the Irish House of Commons on 12 October 1779, he demanded that the parliament “pass heads of bills for the extension of our own trade” and assert its right to trade under its own laws. He placed this demand into the context of the history of British liberty. The Irish people “want not the further guardianship of a cruel stepmother, nor ought we any longer to trust to the insidious promises of a jealous sister.” The family of British peoples had a common inheritance and shared experience, and should therefore live under the same laws and conditions, Newenham argued:

Whatever obligations we heretofore owed Great Britain; they have been ten-fold repaid; our brave soldiers and sailors assisted Britain in conquering the Eastern and Western Indies; ... to the East we cannot trade and to the West our trade is restricted... what obligations do we then owe Great Britain? I may be told, that we owe them obligations for their assistance in the Glorious Revolution in 1688... such a revolution is certainly agreeable to the spirit of the constitution; it is a right inherent in the people.⁶⁹

Newenham’s explicit appeal to revolutionary principles was a conscious move on the part of the scion of a Quaker merchant family with radical roots. Newenham’s explication of the logic that underpinned Irish claims to free trade as a right was not directly echoed by other speakers in the Irish House of Commons. Their demands were instead couched in more utilitarian terms of response to the distress of the population facing economic difficulty.

Newenham's embrace of the radical interpretation of the Glorious Revolution as an exemplar of British liberty was more successful out of doors and animated the demonstration by the Volunteers in Dublin on 4 November 1779, William III's birthday. The mass gathering of Volunteers in support of free trade, including Newenham's own "Liberty Volunteers," made their demonstration at the statue of William III at College Green. Military virtue, free trade, and the inheritance of the Glorious Revolution jostled together in the placards that were hung around the statue: "Relief to Ireland," "The Volunteers of Ireland," "A Short Money Bill," "A Free Trade—or else."⁷⁰ Hostile Tory commentators underlined that the demand for free trade was not and should not be understood as an economic measure designed simply to alleviate poverty and asserted that the demonstration was part of a political campaign. A Dublin correspondent of the Public Advertiser complained that "nothing less than a universal free trade is now the general cry of the patriots etc. etc. The rage and insolence of the spawn of Cromwell (of which we have numbers) added to their canting expressions of in regard to kings in general, are too shocking and formidable to mention. Such people would gladly, like Nero, fiddle while they saw the Empire in flames."⁷¹ The traditional vision of free trade as a building block of liberty remained one of the central organizing concepts of patriot discourse in the Ireland in 1779 and shared many of the features of American mobilization earlier in the decade, such as non-importation pledges and consumer associations.⁷² By October 1779, twenty-two of the thirty-two county Grand Juries had committed themselves to non-importation agreements.⁷³ In December, the North Ministry under George III successfully proposed a series of measures to help promote Irish trade,

including allowing reciprocal trade with the colonies, freeing the export of Irish woollens, and abandoning prohibitions on specific commodities such as glass and hops.

The unsystematic and ad hoc nature of the North provisions of 1779 was a triumph for the Irish understanding of free trade. The ministry continued a process of piecemeal reform and did not explore the possibility of integrating Ireland more firmly into an imperial economic structure.⁷⁴ North's concessions, even couched, as they were, as indulgences, paradoxically fed the Irish political elite's sense of grievance by reinforcing their perception that the British polity was, ideally, a federative structure. Francis Dobbs berated North for having given so little and grudgingly: "My Lord, it is my wish, and I hope and believe it is the wish of every good man in this kingdom, to form an alliance with Great Britain, which nothing can disturb. I conceive this can only be done by a fair and candid enquiry into the natural rights of each kingdom. If Great Britain treats with Ireland under the idea of giving as little as she can, and that little from necessity, Ireland can neither be thankful nor satisfied."⁷⁵ Padhraig Higgins argues that the campaign for legislative independence conducted between 1779 and 1782 generated popular support through consumer boycotts, campaigns in favour of local manufactures and demands for tariff reform, all under the banner of free trade.⁷⁶ However majority Irish opinion did not recognize that the constitutional and political framework it had used to orient itself within the British polity was being disassembled. Free trade no longer meant the ability of dependent kingdoms or colonies to set their own trade regulations. Irish success in securing trade allowances reflected the temporary weakness of the ministry rather than the inherent coherence or power of the Irish position. Whatever free trade might mean it would never mean the capacity for Ireland to create its own

regulations for trade. Irish enthusiasts for free trade seem also not to have been aware that in appealing to free trade they were pushing at an open door, though one that opened in a direction they did not necessarily want to travel. Figures in the background of the North ministry, such as Henry Dundas and William Eden, had consulted with Adam Smith on the 30 October 1779 on how they might respond to the crisis provoked by armed demonstrations of the Irish Volunteers.⁷⁷ Dundas was already fairly sanguine about freeing Irish trade, writing that “there is trade enough in the world for the industry of both England and Ireland,” and Smith was unequivocal in support of the idea, arguing that no matter the Irish demand, it would be foolish not to grant it.⁷⁸ Neither Smith nor Dundas imagined that freeing Ireland’s trade was a step toward distancing Ireland from the empire.

William Eden’s letters to the earl of Carlisle placed the problem of Irish free trade into this context of imperial coordination. He argued that the problem posed was not whether Ireland should enjoy a free trade, but rather where Ireland should fit into an imperial economy. Eden directly cited the debates between Hume and Tucker on Ireland and pointed out that when the cattle trade had been liberalized there had been protest in Ireland precisely because prices and rents went up. He noted as well that despite the availability of home manufactures to Irish consumers, they favored English goods because of their quality and price.⁷⁹ A poor Ireland would find it hard to undermine English trade, even in Ireland. For Eden, the principle of free trade meant nothing, it was the practice of imperial trade that drew his attention, noting that “the questions to be asked are indeed numerous, nice, and intricate. Theoretical deductions will not assist us; trading establishments, regulations of commerce, and the whole system of revenue are

involved in the propositions. A principal spring or wheel of a complicated clock-work may be deranged; but to turn the key around upon the instant with violence, would tend only to demolish all the component parts.”⁸⁰ Eden absolutely accepted the principle that “the flourishing of neighbouring nations in their trade is to our advantage,” but still argued that free trade would have to be politically managed if it were not to have unforeseeable perverse results, “maxims being too narrow to embrace all the combinations of human events, political operations must often be influenced by circumstances.”⁸¹ The politics of free trade had to be managed in such a way that they did not disturb the political structures of empire.

Eden’s engagement on this topic gained him the post of chief secretary in the Irish administration from 1780 until 1782, responsible for the day-to-day management of the government. Local experience reinforced his view that free trade could only work in a stable environment of political management. He was incredulous that pamphleteers could seriously argue that the Irish Army, supported by Irish customs revenues, should not be governed by articles of war promulgated in the British parliament because “the army, tho’ not imperial, is the army of the empire.”⁸² He was also astounded, but not surprised, that Irish merchants were complaining that the legislature was not manipulating tariff barriers to protect them: “the duty, as now settled by the Irish parliament, is considerably in favour of the Irish manufacturer, on the exact footing of equalization, which was the condition of the grant of the West India trade to Ireland.”⁸³ For Eden, a free trade did not mean a total lack of coordination and regulation between the commercial policies of Britain and Ireland.

Events proved Eden right. Irish claims under the new dispensation legally to export woollens and linens according to the terms of the venerable Methuen Treaty, which had regulated Anglo-Portuguese trade since 1703, were rejected by the Portuguese, precisely on the grounds that Ireland was now a distinct trading entity.⁸⁴ The Irish Parliament complained that “the usual quantity of hats, shoes, stockings, etc., which the Portuguese were fond of smuggling as English goods, were now unaccountably, on liberation of our trade, rejected but saw the restriction as a problem in relations with Britain”⁸⁵ The irony was that Ireland and Portugal had enjoyed a substantial illicit trade in woollens, which was now threatened by the new clarity in relations. Irish political elite opinion saw the closure of Portuguese ports as a crisis of the new trade arrangements between Britain and Ireland. Grattan, speaking to the Irish House of Commons pointed out that “a free trade could be considered no more than a shadow when foreign countries alleged they know of no treaty, whereby the manufactures of Ireland can be admitted to a market.”⁸⁶ Unpalatable as it might be to Irish opinion, Irish free trade would only be meaningful if Ireland inherited Britain’s trade privileges. In that case, there seemed little argument against being bound by imperial commercial policy.

The same perception, that a neo-Machiavellian model of free trade as the capacity of separate elements of the British Empire to regulate their own trade was incompatible with the emerging imperial structures, drove William Drennan to conclusions opposite to those of Eden. Drennan, an Presbyterian radical and future founder of the United Irishmen, established his political credentials with his Letters of Orellana. He argued that British liberty had become so corrupted that it was an illusion, writing that “the freedom of your present mutilated constitution is only to be found in the Utopia of a fanciful

French man, or the political reveries of a Genevan philosopher.”⁸⁷ Drennan was confronting what he saw as a systematic misunderstanding of British politics by French and French-inspired commentators, and particularly by Montesquieu and Jean-Louis de Lolme, the Genevan philosopher in question.⁸⁸ Drennan argued that these theorists homogenized and misrepresented the principles of British liberty. De Lolme’s Constitution of England, for example, argued that the liberty of the English was sustained by the power of the executive.⁸⁹ De Lolme’s defense of the English constitution and monarchy was central to his critiques of the Irish Volunteer movement and his promotion of union between Ireland and Britain. Drennan shared de Lolme’s perception that the mode of government had been transformed, but this belief drove Drennan to the conclusion that the supposed benefits of empire were in fact subversions of liberty. He argued that the liberation of trade in 1779 and the subsequent grant of legislative independence in 1782 could not fundamentally alter Ireland’s place in an imperial system: “Ireland obtained what has been called free trade and independent constitution, two of the greatest curses, I am free to say, that ever can befall a country, unless they be crowned, and that speedily too, with parliamentary reform.” He explained that “if free trade be not improved, we continue as we were, insulted indeed, with a nominal independence of constitution”, but free trade alone would not make constitutional freedoms really live “if it be improved, we are only gilding the chains with which others shall bind us.”⁹⁰ Free trade without a reformed constitution would merely generate more public revenue and so free the government of all restraint. Drennan’s argument was simple: free trade in the empire gave the people of Ireland the right to trade “in order to raise money sufficient for an aristocracy to purchase that corruption which secures their

own authority.”⁹¹ For Drennan, as for Eden, the venerable idea of a free trade had ceased to be a central organizing principle of British liberty. The question raised by the debate on free trade for Ireland, “is simply and solely this, whether the government of Ireland is to continue an oligarchy, or to become a limited monarchy.”⁹² Free trade without political reform would undermine rather than extend liberty.



William Pitt was pursuing a particular version of imperial reform in his efforts to reach a “final settlement” with Ireland in the first two years of his premiership.⁹³ The negotiation with the Irish House of Commons was one of the first initiatives he sponsored when he won the election of 1784 and ended the whirl of ministries since the fall of North in 1782.⁹⁴ Pitt conceptualized the Irish issue within a much wider imperial context. In his very first letter to Thomas Orde, chief secretary of Ireland and the effective manager of the country, Pitt chivvied him for the “commercial investigation which you have promised me”, referring to research on Irish trade, and reassured him that in everything “relating to commerce, nothing will certainly be done in this country without considering how Ireland, as part of the Empire, will be affected by it.”⁹⁵ Orde shared Pitt’s familiarity with Tucker’s ideas and cited them in his reply to this first letter, agreeing that Ireland’s lack of capital and experience means that she could not compete with England.⁹⁶ What would become clear was that though Pitt and Orde shared Tucker’s point of departure, they had very different ends to him in mind. Tucker had argued that free trade would drive moral and political reform in the empire; Pitt saw economic reform, in the shape of free trade, as an alternative to disruptive political change.

The central instrument for settling the relationship between Ireland and the rest of the empire was a proposal for a free trade area in the British Isles. This proposal had a

complicated, and ultimately unsuccessful, passage through the London and Dublin Parliaments in 1785. The first version of the propositions submitted by Orde offered to the Irish House of Commons “a plan for the liberal arrangement of commercial intercourse between Great Britain and Ireland... as the most effectual means of strengthening the empire at large.” It would have eliminated all tariffs on products of Irish and British manufacture in the two kingdoms, eliminated bounties on most products except some foodstuffs, and freed the colonial re-export trade.⁹⁷ The price to be paid was in the tenth proposition, which assigned all surpluses from the Irish hereditary revenue—largely customs and excise payments—toward the elimination of the English national debt.⁹⁸ That measure was able to pass once the surplus was instead hypothecated to the support of the Navy and further contributions in wartime were left to the discretion of the Irish Parliament. Pitt was aware that free trade would considerably dislocate trade and disadvantage particular sectors of English industry. He faced vocal resistance from Lancashire and Scottish manufacturers, organized in the “Great Chamber of Manufactures” led by Josiah Wedgwood and orchestrated in parliament by William Eden and Lord Sheffield, but managed to have the measure pass through London on 12 May.⁹⁹ To pass the British House of Commons, the propositions had to be altered again to reinsert control of the Irish hereditary revenue surplus and include a new condition that all regulation of colonial trade and shipping passed in the British Parliament be enacted in the Irish Parliament as well.¹⁰⁰ Tightening control over Irish commerce was less a concession to English opinion than a reassertion of the logic of the propositions, since the operation of a free trade area would have demanded common regulation in any circumstance. John Hely-Hutchinson’s pamphlet pointed out that the 1779 provisions had

subjected Irish trade to the colonies to exactly the same sets of regulations.¹⁰¹ However, by making clear what was inherent in the arrangements, the rewritten resolutions generated renewed opposition in Ireland.¹⁰² Despite a century of agitation in favor of free trade and the collaboration of John Beresford and John Foster, commissioner of the revenue and chancellor of the exchequer in Ireland respectively, in responding to the revised proposal, the amended bill had to be withdrawn from the Irish Parliament in August.¹⁰³

The narrative of the failed negotiations is coherent and comprehensible but leaves a vital analytical question unanswered. The decision taken by the managers of the Irish House of Commons in August marked a complete reversal of opinion on a central demand of Irish political elites. The claim to free trade, which had been an element in maintaining the integrity of the constitutional claim to legislative autonomy, became separated from and contrasted with the idea of autonomy. Negotiations, by their nature, force the parties to them into uncomfortable compromises and unsettle old ideas and arrangements; what we have to explain is why the political difficulties in this particular case could not be overcome. Transformations in the meaning of free trade and in particular its function within empire, and not perennial problems of accommodating political elites in the multi-polar British Atlantic world, were the reason that even the most astute political actors were unable to fashion an agreement.

Pitt's 1785 proposals tried to find a middle way between the irreconcilable positions of Eden and Drennan, imperial integration or republican reform, to "give Ireland an almost unlimited communication of commercial advantages if we can receive in return some security that her strength and riches will be to our benefit, and that she will

contribute from time to time in their increasing proportions to the common exigencies of the empire.”¹⁰⁴ In his correspondence with Orde, Pitt was frank that he was also trying to find an instrument that would not alienate Catholic opinion, writing, “I do not know that a reform would make them feel their situation the more galling; unless it proceeds on the idea of universal suffrage being essential to liberty.” He continues to acknowledge that an agreement that only attended to Protestant concerns “may keep the Parliament, but lose the people.”¹⁰⁵ The need for a novel arrangement was well explained in a Dublin pamphlet attributed to Charles Francis Sheridan, a Rockingham Whig employed in the Irish administration in 1785. Sheridan writes, “the relative situation of the two kingdoms was without a single exception totally new. An imperium in Imperio, two states equally free, each equally independent of the other, but both under one common sovereign, forming coequal branches of the common empire. This was a situation concerning which history was silent, and experience useless.”¹⁰⁶ To Sheridan, the real danger was that the unstable situation would drive either to total integration or separation, the options promoted by Eden and Drennan.

Pitt explained his response to the conundrum in a long letter to Thomas Orde in September 1784. Pitt pointed out that the real challenge was to “find some line according to which the Parliaments of the two countries may exercise the rights of legislation, without clashing with each other on the one hand, or, on the other, being encumbered by the necessity of actual and positive concert on every point of common concern.”¹⁰⁷ His proposal to commit Irish budgetary surplus to the English national debt was an imaginative way to avoid the issue of union or independence.¹⁰⁸ Increasing Irish wealth would reinforce rather than undermine imperial power: “this increase of strength and

riches in Ireland may really prove either a positive addition to that of the Empire at large, or at least a transfer only from one member of it to the other.”¹⁰⁹ Even though this was a creative idea, by attempting to manage Ireland through public credit he was touching Pitt one of the most sensitive areas of late eighteenth-century politics.¹¹⁰ The kinds of innovative public credit instruments that Pitt was proposing had already created a novel kind of political form in which creditworthiness, a distinct political ideology, and military success were mutually reinforcing.¹¹¹ Pitt was absolutely clear that the reforms were designed to amplify imperial power, writing, “that which is given to Ireland may rather augment their wealth and navigation, and the seeds of resources of power to the empire at large, than put them in possession of any actual force capable of being at any time independently exerted under their separate direction.” Orde agreed, adding that without her own force in “times of exigence,” Ireland will “contribute more largely than hitherto to her exertions against a common enemy.”¹¹² Under Pitt’s plan, increased Irish wealth could never be used in Ireland to support the kinds of public credit necessary to finance independent armies and navies, but instead would have become another source of support for imperial public credit.

The use of the architecture of public finance and public debt as an instrument of imperial integration was an idea that was already in circulation. James Laffan of Kilkenny argued that the “Dean of Gloucester ... has proved that a poor country cannot stand competitions with a rich country,” and so the more mature English economy would always outcompete the Irish economy because it provided capital at a lower rate of interest:

A merchant who ships off an adventure for a foreign market expects the interest of his money and at least ten shillings profit for every twenty shillings interest he pays on account of the hazard he runs. A British merchant who rates the interest of his stock at 4 per cent must make 6 per cent profit, that is 4 per cent for the interest of this stock and 2 per cent for his hazard. An Irish merchant not to be a loser must sell at the rate of 9 per cent, that is 6 per cent for the interest of his stock and 3 per cent for his hazard. Now it necessarily follows, that a British ship and an Irish ship going to the same port with the same commodities, bought at the same price, the British merchant undersells the Irish 3 per cent and course, as the Irish merchant will have no sale for his goods until the British cargo is disposed of, the British merchant has the greater profit...¹¹³

Money, debt, and empire had a complex relationship. Tucker, again, had been prescient in his comments on the 1751 currency act, which limited the amount of paper money the New England colonies could put into circulation.¹¹⁴ Tucker understood that control of their own money had allowed the colonies, acting as political communities, to escape the disciplines of credit and thus the control of the mother country: “laws were enacted first to issue out bills of credit to a certain amount, and then to make a tender of those bills to be considered as an adequate discharge of those debts, and a legal release from payment. A most compendious method this for getting out of debt.”¹¹⁵ The 1751 Act only covered the New England colonies and after 1755 the other colonies continued to issue paper to support the costs of war. Virginia alone issued over £440,000 between 1755 and 1757.¹¹⁶ The difficulties that the colonies faced in meeting their debts and the temptation to devalue them by devaluing colonial paper provoked the Currency Act of 1764,

prohibiting the emission of any colonial paper currency.¹¹⁷ Limiting the capacity of the colonies to issue their own money became one of the grievances that drove the Americans to revolution.

One of Pitt's goals in 1785 was to avoid recreating in Ireland the dynamic that had driven the Americans out of the empire. He sought to achieve this by aligning local and imperial interests through a new kind of institution rather than by direct political control: "not legislatively but by reciprocity of interest and national prosperity and security," as one pamphleteer explained it.¹¹⁸ Currency had been a matter of particular sensitivity in Ireland since the successful resistance inspired by Jonathan Swift to William Wood's charter to supply halfpennies to Dublin.¹¹⁹ Coordination through control of the money supply was therefore out of the question. In his correspondence with Rutland, Pitt was trying to reorganize and renew the values of the empire without compromising its structures. "Total subordination of Ireland and of restrictions on her commerce for the benefit of this country, which was by this means able to bear the burden of the empire" had proved to be a misguided policy and was to be rejected in favor of "what is now proposed to be confirmed and completed, that of an equal participation of all commercial advantages..."¹²⁰ If Ireland were to enjoy those advantages then she would have to shoulder her share of the fiscal burden of protecting them.

Pitt's proposals offered a double benefit. Not only would they coordinate Irish and British policy, they would also begin to harmonize the fiscal burdens between Britain and the relatively lightly taxed Ireland.¹²¹ The proposals were flexible and capable of adaptation. After the British Parliament had amended them in May to assert a stronger

role for itself, there was still room for maneuver through which Irish interests could be recognized. One of the most important changes in the May revisions was a series of articles harmonizing all future trade regulations between the two jurisdictions. Beresford proposed to Orde that in cases “where transport duties in either kingdom exceed those of the other, they shall be lowered in the kingdom where they exceed, to the amount payable in the other,” which would have respected the provision but protected the Irish low-tariff regime and allowed separate consumption tax systems.¹²²

The real sticking points turned not on these issues of finance but the politics of free trade. The Irish consistently argued that there was “no positive law prohibiting Ireland from trade with the East Indies,” that Ireland had a right of re-export of colonial goods, and that all regulations on the trade with the thirteen colonies had lapsed as the former colonies were now independent states.¹²³ Upon the “expiation of the charter of the East India Company,” Ireland expected to have a free hand to trade in Asia. There was even a suggestion that Ireland had the right to import directly from the French colonies, though it would not exercise that right.¹²⁴ Commentators were well aware that all of these questions were highly politically contentious and amounted to a blueprint for the British Empire as a confederation. Lord Sheffield, one of the most important critics of Pitt’s plans, was of the view that more rather than less regulation should be imposed on the American trade and that exactly the wrong conclusions were being drawn from the American war: “the independence of America has encouraged the wildest sallies of imagination; systems have been preferred to experience, rash theory to successful practice.”¹²⁵ Sheffield was not alone in wishing to take advantage of the relatively weak United States’ governments’ capacity in order to regulate trade; if Ireland were allowed

free entry Britain would enjoy leverage.¹²⁶ Some Irish commentators saw the free trade proposals as a means through which Irish comparative advantage would eventually undermine the British Empire altogether. A pamphlet argued that the revised propositions should be accepted, even at the price of greater political control from London. In any structure of free trade Ireland would eventually outcompete Britain since it only enjoyed an “artificial trade” and “monopolizes the trade of the East, by an army of 70,000 men,”. That could only continue as long as Britain superiority in arms could be sustained.¹²⁷ Ireland, unburdened by such an expensive establishment, “ought to look for wealth by a fair and universal trade... its trade so capable of being made absolutely free” And so become more efficient and eventually more prosperous.¹²⁸ A policy of butter would in the long run do away with the guns. Pitt did not imagine free trade in this way as an instrument in the decline of British power.

The reasons behind Tucker’s support of the propositions also illustrate why they failed. Tucker argued that a free trade area with Ireland would destroy British monopolies. Irish manufacturers and merchants able to import and export to and from Britain would undercut monopolies, including that of the East India Company, and the supports of monopoly, most importantly slavery. Irish trade would provide the leverage for fundamental imperial reform:

For self-interest (which in the present case is only another name for buying cheap) would do more towards exciting a strong aversion to the present monopoly of labour in our plantations, and to an abhorrence of the various cruelties attendant on slavery, than all the reasonings, moral arguments, or eloquence in the world. Therefore, as lowering the price of sugars, rum, cotton etc. etc. is the grand object

to be attended to, let us see whether the present state of Ireland can afford us any prospect toward attaining this important end. That is, whether the independence of that kingdom can, or cannot be made subservient to the cause of humanity.¹²⁹

The prospect of a free trade area inspired Tucker to a progressive imperial cosmopolitanism. Ireland was to be the linch-pin of imperial reform, offering the ground inside British tariff barriers to destroy all navigation acts and even the corn laws.¹³⁰ Tucker, perhaps unwittingly, illuminated the radical potential of these propositions as well as the reason for the alliance of forces against them. Free trade as a set of institutional arrangements ran up against political limits.

The political opposition to Pitt's commercial propositions united otherwise hostile bodies of opinion. Some voices in Britain wanted British preeminence to be more explicitly acknowledged. David Pultenay, the duke of Rutland's agent in London while he was lord lieutenant in Dublin, argued that the precedence of the Britain had to be acknowledged: "one country must take the lead in making regulations respecting trade and navigation, ..., who then should regulate? The country already in possession of the commerce."¹³¹ Lord Chancellor Edward Thurlow wrote a note to Pitt commenting that if the Irish wanted free trade with Britain, then they were defining themselves as independent and no longer had any right to access to British colonies: "by invading the principle, they destroy their right to that trade, which opens to a more extensive clash of interests, and the argument upon it must turn on the wisdom and expediency of keeping any terms between the countries."¹³² Rutland, who had begun to align his views with the local elite, rejected the idea more strongly than anyone, writing, "your idea of obtaining a revenue from Ireland in return for the concession of a full equality of commerce I must

confess to be, in my opinion, impracticable, inconsistent with the principle of true policy, and, I fear, would completely defeat the main object of your munificence.”¹³³ What Rutland could not offer was any other solution to the problem of coordination. In contrast, Patriot opinion in Ireland cried tyranny: “if, for the misfortune of both countries, Mr Pitt’s plan had been carried into effect, and the two islands been again bound in the connection of dominion and dependence; good God! What friend to their general happiness but must shudder at the fatal consequences that must soon have followed from the ill-formed union! Jealousy, hatred, aversion, at the moment, must have soon burst out, on the first favourable opportunity, into acts of enmity, civil war and bloodshed.”¹³⁴ Some perspicacious opponents of the bill, such as William Drennan, did not celebrate its defeat, since he saw that “this event also shows the utter impracticability of forming any commercial treaty with Britain and therefore tends either to union or separation.”¹³⁵ Shared dislike of Pitt’s proposal veiled the lack of credible political alternatives.

The defeat of the free trade proposals of 1785 was not a contingent or accidental event but a moment in the crisis of imperial reorganization after the American War. Much of the thinking that animated the commercial propositions paralleled the strategy used in the 1784 India Bill, which left political authority in the hands of the East India Company and exerted control by fiscal means.¹³⁶ The forces that resisted the Irish Commercial Propositions in England were also those that had promoted the alternative 1783 India Bill, which would have exerted direct Parliamentary control. The Irish example illustrates the limits of Pitt’s model of empire. One of his supporters in Ireland, Charles Francis Sheridan, pointed out that free trade necessarily embedded Ireland within institutions of imperial control: “how then can the authority of a legislature be wounded,

respecting an object over which it has no authority? When therefore Great Britain gives to Ireland a share in the British trade to the British colonies and plantations, she gives her an interest in that trade for her advantage, but she does not mean to furnish a new object to the Irish legislature for the exercise of its authority.”¹³⁷ Free trade, according to this understanding, limited the scope of the Irish political community to create law, even as it amplified the ability of Irish merchants and traders to make profit. The separation of different spheres of power, and in particular the distinction between politics and economics, was central to the political thinkers such as de Lolme, whose writing informed Pitt’s thinking. The opposition to the commercial propositions turned on the ideas that these aspects of citizenship could not be so easily separated and that proposition that the executive should be allowed to create the political context for economic and social liberty was not compelling.

The commercial propositions of 1785 appealed to a complicated and ultimately contradictory vision of the nature of the British Empire as an empire of free trade. Free trade and regulatory integration seemed to offer an ideal and an instrument through which the British realms could be coordinated without recreating the political dynamics at the root of the American conflict. This vision of empire proved impossible because the fundamental proposition that animated it, the separation of political identity from economic liberty, could not be sustained in practice. Even some supporters of the reform, especially Tucker, did not respect the distinction and saw economic reform as a mechanism for political and legal change. In particular, he saw the reforms as an instrument that could undermine the East India Company and the forms of territorial empire it was committed to. Pitt, however, saw reform as a means of strengthening the

empire and integrating its constituent elements without fundamentally altering its nature. The propositions collapsed because these internal tensions became more evident under the pressure of criticism. An anonymous commentator contrasted the extension of trade in 1779 with the 1785 measures: “it was not then generally agreed (and still less is it now) what ought to be comprehended under the expression Free Trade.”¹³⁸ Thomas Lewis O’Beirne went even further, arguing that the entire effort had made a difficult situation worse. The goal of total free trade in a federative system was never a realistic political option and through the negotiations, “the very basis of the proposed treaty has been fundamentally reversed, until the existing compact between the two kingdoms has been essentially violated.”¹³⁹ Liberal political economy did not of itself offer a route to a British exceptionality that finessed the tensions inherent in empire.¹⁴⁰

Pitt, and old Chathamites such as Charles Pratt, the earl of Camden, had assumed that the logic of imperial integration, and the self-evident interest that all parties shared in the empire, would eventually overcome all opposition. Camden, writing to his son-in-law Robert Stewart in early August 1785, was quite sanguine about the Irish Parliament’s treatment of the altered bill: “the propositions are again to run the gauntlet at Dublin, I am not very anxious about the issue at present. They may be postponed but I am persuaded they will not be rejected, for the two countrys [sic] cannot exist without this or some similar arrangement.”¹⁴¹ Even after the bill had been withdrawn, Pitt was still “very far from despairing that the nation may e’re long see its true interest.”¹⁴² A mere twenty days after his expression of confidence, Camden was willing to accept that the outright rejection of the arrangements was a symptom of a new political crisis, writing that “the rejection of the present arrangement is not of half the consequence for the commerce of

either as it is for their political harmony.”¹⁴³ He also recognized that if a common interest could not be relied on, then “any dispute between the two nations would tend gradually to their final disunion.”¹⁴⁴ The cracks in the imperial architecture soon began to widen. In 1786 the question arose if Ireland should enjoy the benefits of the new trade treaty negotiated by Eden with France. The clear consensus was that it should not. William Eden continued to see a constitutionally ambiguous Ireland as a problem within the British commercial world. When arguing for the trade treaty he thought that in principle, “Ireland will at present expect, and is in policy right, specifically and clearly to be included in every British treaty,” but recognized that “the two nations are at this hour on a different system in their respective trades with France,” and therefore much that was central to British policy “will not be so clearly acceptable to Ireland.”¹⁴⁵ C. T. Greville described the irresolvable conundrum to the duke of Rutland in a pessimistic note. He could see no way in which the relationship of Ireland to Britain could be managed: “Ireland is too great to be unconnected with us, and too near us to be dependent on a foreign state, and too little to be independent. The separation which has been made will require more than human wisdom to reconcile it with amity and generous emulation.”¹⁴⁶ The idea that Ireland might enjoy British liberty within a loose structure under the tutelage of Britain became increasingly untenable. Under the pressures of revolution and foreign war, a very different model of empire would emerge, that resolved these tensions, though at the price of creating a new set of problems.¹⁴⁷

¹ Arguably, the demand preceded the Glorious Revolution. See T. C. Barnard, “Planters and Politics in Cromwellian Ireland,” Past and Present 61 (November 1973), 60-66.

² James Kelly, *Prelude to Union: Anglo-Irish Politics in the 1780s* (Cork, 1992); David R. Schweitzer, "The Failure of William Pitt's Irish Trade Propositions 1785," *Parliamentary History* 3, no. 1 (1984): 129-45; Paul Kelly, "British and Irish Politics in 1785," *English Historical Review* 90, no. 356 (July 1975): 536-63; R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760-1801* (Oxford, 1979), 311-38; David Lammey, "The Free Trade Crisis: A Reappraisal," in *Parliament, Politics and People: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Irish History* (Oxford, 1989); A. P. W. Malcolmson, *John Foster: The Politics of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy* (Oxford, 1978), 51-52

³ T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York, 2004); Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge MA, 2010); Henry C. Clark, *Compass of Society: Commerce and Absolutism in Old-Regime France* (Lanham MD, 2007); Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, 1997); Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective*, (Cambridge MA, 2005).

⁴ Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (Anne Mcholer et al. ed. and trans.), *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge, 1989), 329.

⁵ Sophus Reinert, *Translating Empire: Emulation and the Origins of Political Economy* (Cambridge MA, 2011).

⁶ Padhraig Higgins, *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, (Madison WI, 2010), 82-105.

⁷ Mary Birkett, *The African Slave Trade: Adressed to Members of her own Sex*, (Dublin, 1792); Nini Rodgers, “Two Quakers and a Utilitarian: The Reaction of three Irish Women Writers to the Problem of Slavery, 1789-1807”, *Royal Irish Academy Proceedings*, c, Vol. 100 No. 4 (2000) 137-157.

⁸ John Hely-Hutchinson, *A Letter from the Secretary of State to the Mayor of Cork, on the Subject of the Bill presented by Mr. Orde*, (Dublin, 1785), 17.

⁹ NLI Bolton papers, MS 16355.39 Pitt to Rutland, Downing St, 6th January 1785.

¹⁰ Letter from Richard Wellesley (3rd Earl of Mornington) to Henry Grattan, 20 June 1785, BL Add MS 38103 v10..

¹¹ NLI Bolton papers, MS 16355.61 Pitt to Orde, Downing St, 3 March 1785.

¹² Nini Rodgers, “Ireland and the Black Atlantic in the Eighteenth Century”, *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 126 (November 2000), 174-192.

¹³ The “empire of free trade” has been extensively debated. See John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, *Economic History Review* Vol. 6, No 1, (1953), 1-15; Oliver McDonagh, “The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade”, *Economic History Review*, Vol. 14, No 3, (1962) 489-501; Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy, the Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism 1750-1850*, (Cambridge, 1974); Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace*, (Philadelphia, 1998);

¹⁴ NLI Bolton papers, MS 16355.39 Pitt to Rutland, Downing St, 6th January 1785.

¹⁵ Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism*, 33-37 argues this was a tactical position created by their alliance with Fox in the opposition to Pitt. John E. Crowley, “Neomercantalism and the *Wealth of Nations*: British Commercial Policy after the

American Revolution”, *Historical Journal*, Vol. 33, No.2 (1990), 339-60 for an alternative reading.

¹⁶ BL Add MS 38103 f5 Richard Wellesley (3rd Earl of Mornington) to Charles Townshend, 22 January 1783.

¹⁷ Richard Whatmore, “Etienne Dumont, the British Constitution and the French Revolution”, *Historical Journal*, Vol. 50 No. 1 (2002), 34-5.

¹⁸ Neo-mercantilist is Semmel’s formulation and neo-Machiavellian political economy derives from Istvan Hont’s work. Semmel, *Free Trade Imperialism*, 9; Istvan Hont, “Free Trade and the Economic Limits to National Politics: Neo-Machiavellian Political Economy Reconsidered”, in, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective*, (Cambridge MA, 2005), 185-266. The political relevance of Smith’s ideas was questioned even by Smith himself, but for the program, see Donald Winch, *Adam Smith’s Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision*, (Cambridge, 1978); idem. , *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834*, (Cambridge, 1996)

¹⁹ C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830*, (London, 1989), 115-16; P. J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India and America c.1750-1783*, (Oxford, 2005), 352-372; Bernard Semmel, “The Hume-Tucker Debate and Pitt’s Trade Proposals”, *Economic Journal*, Vol. 75, No. 300 (December 1965), 762-3.

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Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption and Civil Society in Modern Britain*, (Oxford, 2008).

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